

# Local Identities in Globalized Regions: Teens, Everyday Life, and Television

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This article presents qualitative research exploring how one consumer group, urban teenagers 14–15 years old, in four global cities — Johannesburg (South Africa), Bangalore (India), Munich (Germany), and New York (United States) — articulate and negotiate their identities on the ground. It takes into account the transnational television networks reaching them along with government sponsored national and privately owned local ones. Our comparative analyses of teens talking about their everyday lives and television reveal similarities and differences in their lived realities and in their relationships to and interpretations of television programs and characters. The findings show patterns clustered around the teens' gender, class, and teen identities, but these are complicated by their experiences of family, peers, school, religion, language, and nation, as well as different regional television offerings. Television played a role in their ongoing journeys toward selfhood; these journeys are thoroughly grounded by their social and cultural backgrounds and situations.

## INTRODUCTION

Urban spaces around the world offer teenagers a variety of communities for belonging. Technological convergences and political and economic interdependencies made possible by globalization (Herman & McChesney, 2003; Mattelart, 2003; Thussu, 2000) facilitate the availability of foreign products in local marketplaces, all packaged with the tantalizing promise of membership in a global community. Local, national, and global television programming in particular, makes possible avenues for the expression of viewer identities (Thussu, 1998), which themselves are an amalgamation of gender, class, religious, ethnic, national, and sexual orientation positions. Scholarship on youth and globalization recognizes that complex processes are involved in how teens consume media and products

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(Anderson & Miles, 1999); the study of their media habits has to be undertaken through careful attention to their contexts and lived realities (Willis, 1990).

The trend in contemporary studies of transnational media is to view their production and consumption through a “cosmopolitan perspective” that acknowledges their reach across national boundaries (Chalaby, 2005, p. 158). At the same time, we are reminded that national forces are by no means diminished; rather, they are re-scaled to meet the demands of urban globalization (Barnett, 2004). The study of media consumption in a globalizing world must acknowledge the interconnections available to consumers through transnational media *and* their grounding in local cultural contexts.

The project discussed in this article is an international undertaking and aims to understand the meaning of television characters for the formation of cultural identity of young people in different countries. Specifically, it explores how one consumer group, urban teenagers 14–15 years old, in four global cities — Johannesburg (South Africa), Bangalore (India), Munich (Germany), and New York (United States) — articulate and negotiate their identities on the ground. Taking into account the transnational television networks reaching them along with government-sponsored national and privately owned local ones, the study posed the following questions: How does television facilitate the expression of teen identities? How are their lived realities different and similar? Perhaps most important for the media scholar, what statement can we make regarding the quality and meaning of television for teens located in specific places and time?

These questions demand qualitative, in-depth analysis. Intending to derive “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) for comparative study, researchers in the four cities identified six teens to tell stories about favorite television characters and the roles they played in their lives. Fisherkeller’s (2002) examination of relations between television and the cultural identity projects of young people, and McMillin’s (1998) analysis of the interconnections between television and viewers’ perceptions of their national, religious, language, class, and gender identities, informed the approach to the study. Tales of the field presented here are rich and inscribed within the principles of critical qualitative fieldwork.

## TEENS AND TELEVISION

### Situating the Analysis

Theoretical conceptualizations of the *active audience* (Bobo, 1995; Modleski, 1982; Morley, 1992), the *polysemic nature of the text* (Hall, 1980), and the text itself as a *site of ideology* (Fish, 2001; Jauss, 2001; Mailloux, 2001) from British and American cultural studies frame qualitative fieldwork. Although some elements of ethnography such as case analysis, participant observation, and immersion in the field were incorporated, the methodology used cannot be considered ethnographic, which includes intensive participant observation (Clifford, 1992) and long-term immersion in various aspects of respondents’ lives. With its focus on context (Ang, 1991), the dialogue between respondent and text, and the respondents’ interpretive communities (Mailloux, 2001), this study may be considered a comparative reception analysis.

Researchers conducting fieldwork in Johannesburg,<sup>1</sup> Bangalore,<sup>2</sup> Munich,<sup>3</sup> and New York<sup>4</sup> followed a common qualitative methodology,<sup>5</sup> which consisted of three distinct phases spanning 2003–04. During the first phase, teens representing as diverse a population as possible in terms of class, religion, ethnicity, language, caste, and gender were contacted. The details of exactly how teens were identified and contacted are complex and vary region by region, depending on the network of connections available to each of the principle investigators and their organizational affiliations. Some teens were contacted through schools, some through youth service organizations, and some by individual recommendation. From a pool of approximately 10–15 teens in each country, six were further selected for the study; selection criteria included the teens' availability and willingness to participate, gender balance, and representation of diversity appropriate to each region (see Table 1). During the first meeting with each teen, researchers aimed to learn about the young person's life. Researchers and their assistants spent an afternoon with the respondent, discussing the respondent's interests and challenges, experiences at home, school, and with peers, various identity positions, and possibilities for the future. The respondents were asked to collect photographs that best represented their lives (in terms of family, friends, home, school, social spaces, and so on), and material on their favorite television shows and characters.

During the second phase, which was conducted after the respondents had a few weeks to collect material about their real and televised worlds, the researcher interviewed the respondents further about their lives while focusing on their television habits and viewing rituals, and what they thought and felt about favorite television programs and characters. Such interviews were informal, in-depth conversations during which the researcher also took photographs of the respondents and their environments and browsed through the respondents' collected materials.

The interview experience itself varied among countries. For example, in Bangalore, interviews were conducted in respondents' homes (where the researcher was served refreshments and often engaged in lengthy conversations with other family members) or school (where the researcher conversed with various classmates of the respondents since the fellow students were curious about the study and wanted their views on television to be heard as well). In Munich, researchers went to the homes of the respondents and were able to capture the familial context of each through photographs. In Johannesburg as in Bangalore, interviews were held at the homes

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<sup>1</sup>Firdoze Bulbulia, chairperson of the Children and Broadcasting Foundation for Africa, was the primary researcher in Johannesburg.

<sup>2</sup>Susheela Punitha, professor emeritus of Bangalore University, identified 14 respondents in Bangalore, India, in January 2004. After conducting preliminary interviews with each respondent in February, nine were chosen for this study. Punitha monitored the scrapbook and journal activity for two months after which the primary investigator, Divya McMillin, interviewed eight of the respondents (the ninth was unavailable). Six of the interviews were selected for discussion in this study.

<sup>3</sup>Petra Strohmaier and Anita Lakhota of the Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen IZI (International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television) at Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation) supervised fieldwork among the teens in Munich.

<sup>4</sup>JoEllen Fisherkeller was the primary researcher in New York.

<sup>5</sup>This study was sponsored by the Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen IZI (International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television) at Bayerischer Rundfunk (Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation), Munich, Germany. The methodology was developed by the IZI and followed closely by all researchers.

TABLE 1  
Demographic Details of the Respondents

<i>No.</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>City/Country</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>SES</i>
1.	Rabia	Johannesburg/South Africa	Female	15	Muslim	Indian	Upper income
2.	Luke	Johannesburg/South Africa	Male	15	Christian	Coloured	Middle income
3.	Nina	Johannesburg/South Africa	Female	15	Christian	White	Upper income
4.	Themba	Johannesburg/South Africa	Male	14	Christian	Black	Lower income
5.	Keenan	Johannesburg/South Africa	Male	14	Christian	White	Upper income
6.	Kgomotso	Johannesburg/South Africa	Female	14	Christian	Black	Lower income
7.	Ashok	Bangalore/India	Male	15	Christian	Indian	Middle income
8.	Ambika	Bangalore/India	Female	14	Hindu	Indian	Lower income
9.	Shubha	Bangalore/India	Female	15	Hindu	Indian	Lower income
10.	Teja	Bangalore/India	Male	14	Hindu	Indian	High income
11.	Zohrab	Bangalore/India	Male	14	Parsi/Christian	Indian	Middle income
12.	Anujoth	Bangalore/India	Female	14	Sikh	Indian	High income
13.	Mario	Munich/Germany	Male	14	Christian	White	Middle income
14.	Christian	Munich/Germany	Male	14	Christian	White	Middle income
15.	Verena	Munich/Germany	Female	14	Christian	White	Middle income
16.	Pascal	Munich/Germany	Male	15	Christian	White	Middle income
17.	Martina	Munich/Germany	Female	15	Christian	White	Middle income
18.	Nazan	Munich/Germany	Female		Muslim	Turkish	Middle income
19.	KDAnn	New York/United States	Female	15	Christian	African-American	Lower Income
20.	Tia	New York/United States	Female	15	Christian	African-American	Lower Income
21.	Shawanna	New York/United States	Female	15	Christian	African-American	Lower Income
22.	Luis	New York/United States	Male	15	(unknown)	Puerto Rican/ Hawaiian- American	Middle Income
23.	Ronald	New York/United States	Male	14	Christian	Native American/ Cherokee tribe	Lower Income
24.	Dennis	New York/United States	Male	15	Christian	Italian/Irish/ German- American	Middle Income

*Note:* SES descriptions are generalized to upper, middle, and lower income levels since actual income figure comparisons across countries are meaningless if not put into context. In addition, ethnic categories are regionally specific, and have been identified by the participants in response to researchers' particular inquiries on this topic.

and schools of respondents. In New York, interviews were conducted at community organizations that provide the respondents with a variety of after-school activities and opportunities.

During the third phase, the researcher, having examined the material in some depth, returned to each respondent and discussed the construction of teen identity and favorite television character that emerged from it. This third meeting was designed to provide the respondent an opportunity to add to or correct the researcher's interpretations.

After the fieldwork was conducted, the researchers met at a workshop in Munich in 2004 and pooled their data. Certain patterns emerged regarding teens' sense of themselves and their favorite television characters. These themes will be discussed according to gender and teen identities, but these identity positions flow into each other with socioeconomic background, caste, region, and nation, informing each teen's expressions of the above positions. Our account is necessarily brief, but we hope it conveys some of the complexity of the interweaving strains of identity and

experience among the teens. What we cannot account for in depth is the tremendous diversity of the 24 participants, who are not at all representative (in a statistical sense) of the proportional demographics of each country or of each urban area. Nonetheless, our cases feature real people living in real places and are worthy of our examination as they represent the complexity and dynamic of real people's experiences, whether actual or mediated.

### Situating the Teens and Television

Teens in each city were obviously members of complex and diverse populations, and had access to different kinds of TV. The teens in Johannesburg, 15-year-olds Rabia, Luke, Nina, and 14-year-olds Themba, Keenan, and Kgomotso, could potentially receive a wide variety of television channels, although radio is far more popular and widespread (Strelitz, 2003). South Africa's television history is different from that of most developing nations where the national channel was a voice of the postcolonial government to foster national integration and development. Radio and television in this country serve to institutionalize racial segregation rather than integration. In the postapartheid period, the goals of the South African Broadcasting Authority (SABC) have been much debated as it struggles to define its role as an independent public service broadcaster. With increasing pressures to commercialize, the SABC faces tremendous challenges to its goal of integrating educational broadcasting within its mainstream programming. Since 1996, private, commercialized radio stations and a new free-to-air television channel have provided competition for the SABC, which itself has been reconfigured into an independent public service broadcaster (Barnett, 2004; Tomaselli & Teer-Tomaselli, 2003). Criticisms that the increasingly commercialized SABC is catering to the development of a black-youth market notwithstanding, the SABC remains a broadcasting giant in South Africa, with edutainment innovations such as *Soul City* and *Khululeka* (Bulbulia, 1998). More recently, the *tsotsitaal* vernacular *Yizo Yizo* (*The Way It Is*) on SABC1 addressed issues such as violence, rape, drug abuse, and sexual harassment in the fictional township Supatsela High School, and was a controversial yet widely watched program (Barnett, 2004).

The media environments in India, Germany, and the United States are diverse, with particularly private, cable networks catering to niche audiences. In Bangalore, 14-year-olds Zohrab, Teja, Anujoth, and Ambika, and 15-year-olds Ashok and Shubha were exposed to varying menus of cable and satellite channels, depending on their neighborhoods and cable subscriptions. All received Doordarshan, the government-sponsored terrestrial national network, and private vernacular language channels such as the Telugu language Eenadu, Kannada language Udaya TV, and Malayalam language Asianet. Rupert Murdoch's Star TV network (including such channels as Star World, Star Movies, and Star Sports) was available to urban teens Zohrab, Teja, Anujoth, and Ashok but not to Ambika and Shubha, who lived in a rural area. Hindi language dramas such as *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nah*i (*There is Nobody Quite Like Jassi*, the Indian version of *Ugly Betty*) and *Kyun Ki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (*Because the Mother-in-Law Was Once a Daughter-in-Law*), American sitcoms such as *Caroline in the City*, *Friends*, and *The Simpsons* on Star World; and Kannada-language dramas such as *Mangalya* (*Marriage*) and *Kumkuma Bhagya* (*The Blessing of Being Married*) on Udaya TV, were highly popular among the teens.

Implementation of the 1991 European Union's (EU) Television Without Frontiers Directive prevented member states from obstructing broadcasting from other member states. While some scholars are concerned with the loss of national imperatives and the declining support for ethnic

programming (Robins & Aksoy, 2001), others argue that transnational television networks meet the challenge of a globalizing community quite well. Examples of transnational channels reaching 14-year-olds Marian, Christian, Nazan, and Verena, and 15-year-olds Pascal and Martina are: Russia's International ORT, the Czech TV Puls, Norway's NRK International, Germany's Deutsche Welle, the Portuguese RTP Internacional and the Irish Tara TV. In addition, Korea's Korean Arirang channel, Japan's JSTV, which is the satellite arm of the Japanese public broadcaster NHK, and the Indian Zee TV network's Zee TV, Zee Music, and Zee Cinema are broadcast across the EU (Chalaby, 2005).

Television in the United States has long been a commercial enterprise governed primarily by the logic of corporate capitalism and secondarily by rules and regulations of the state intended to protect principles of democracy, such as freedom of expression, equal access and opportunity, and fair representation. Decades of state deregulations, however, along with media industry mega-mergers have prompted many critics to argue that the logic of capitalism has endangered any principles of democracy that once were protected, since an elite group of transnational yet U.S.-based companies own the media industries that produce and distribute programming across systems (McChesney, 2004). Fifteen-year-olds Tia, KD Ann, Shawanna, Dennis, and Luis and 14-year-old Ronald in New York had variable access to hundreds of channels through network, cable, satellite, and digital TV systems. The teens' access to these systems varies due to the socio-economics of their households as well as delivery services that differ across neighborhoods. Nonetheless, all had TV delivery packages providing them with many hours of programming from a variety of channels, most of which are English language-based; very few channels are delivered that are Spanish language-based or based in other languages spoken by the multi-ethnic populations living in New York (or other regions of the United States).

This brief assessment of TV systems in the four locales tells us that teens in this study could choose from private, regional, vernacular language channels (as in the case of India), from national, state-sponsored channels (as in the case of India and South Africa), or from private national and transnational channels (as in the case of all the countries). American shows such as *Friends*, *X-Men*, *Pokemon*, and *The Simpsons* were common to all, providing them an opportunity to partake in transnational (primarily American) cultural contexts and giving them a sense of global consumerhood.

As stated earlier, we regarded the respondents as active viewers yet were careful not to romanticize this notion (see Bird, 2003; McMillin, 2007). Therefore, we paid close attention to their interpretive communities (e.g., peers at school, families, friends in the neighborhood), the polysemic nature of texts, and, to some extent, their ideological contents. Although the method was qualitative reception analysis which involved participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, the researchers were informed by anthropological media studies of which Abu-Lughod's analyses of cinema audiences in Egypt (1997, 2005), Dickey's (1993) analysis of Tamil cinema and audiences in South India, and Mankekar's (2002) analysis of the epic Hindu serials *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* and their reception by viewers in North India, are prominent examples. Such multisited studies assert that postcolonial, minority, and diasporic communities are integral constituents to the study of the historicity and diversity of media audiences (see, e.g., Cunningham & Sinclair, 2000; Gillespie, 1995; Marks, 2000; Shohat & Stam, 1994). The study of teens as an audience must regard them as "enmeshed in relationships of care" (Tronto, 1995, cited in Kaplan, 1999, p. 3), not just as threats to adult society, victims of adults, or emulators of adult culture, as has been the convention (Thorne, 1987). In short, context is

crucial in the study of adolescents and media (Fisher-Keller, 2002), where such audiences are constructed as active, having agency in their interpretations and negotiations with the text (Kellner, 1995; McRobbie, 1991). Through a thorough analysis of contexts and television choices, certain themes emerged in how the viewers expressed their gender and teen identities.

## GENDERED SUBJECTS

In our discussion of gender positions of teens in this study, we revive the political edge of reception studies that has been submerged in North American audience studies (Harris, 1992). Characteristic of British cultural studies in the 1960s, this edge emerges in cultural studies in such commonwealth countries as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and in Nordic and Germanic media research (Drotner, 2000). We explore how the teens' gender informed what and how they watched television and how the latter in turn informed the teens' gendered identities. We also attend to how other identity positions such as class, caste, religion, and language, textured viewing experiences.

Analysis of the correspondence between gender identities and choice of TV characters among study respondents showed clear differences further modulated by their class positions. The lone ranger, the buff, tough guy, the powerful one — these were some of the terms many (though not all) of the teen boys used to describe themselves. Male identity for them was constructed in opposition to female identity where, according to Mario (Munich), some girls “are stupid, some are bitchy.” While Mario worked out regularly to develop his physique, Pascal, also in Munich, was self-conscious about his small stature, his “too red nose,” and his acne. Likewise, Zohrab and Teja in Bangalore disliked their skinny and overweight bodies, respectively. The boys expressed an ambiguity about girls. On the one hand, they derided girls' so-called lower physical abilities and, at the same time, wanted to be desired by girls. Pascal seemed to express what many boys perceived:

[Girls] should not always follow such prejudices somehow when you approach them well like that, when you flirt with them and then they find out that you are 15 or 16 and although they are only 14 then they say something like get away because what they want are older ones, something like 18, 19, 20. Well, and, I mean well I can partly understand that because some guys my age are really that childish, but not all of them are like that.

Relatedly, television choices for many boys followed their quest for physical power and intellectual control. For example, Mario looked up to heroes of action adventures such as *Desperado*, *Final Destination II*, or *Braveheart* and saw Bart of *The Simpsons* as a kind of antihero, saying, “Bart is the coolest . . . because he does a lot of shit” by making fun of people around him and engaging in rebellious and even illegal behavior without fear of consequences. Pascal liked the relaxed control exhibited by Colonel O'Neill in the science fiction *Stargate*, saying, “One cannot always be that relaxed.” Christian preferred another character from *Stargate*, Teal'c (a wise alien according to the program), in part because “he is able to talk to (the humans) and then he always translates what (the bad ones) talk about so that the humans can defeat the bad ones.” Teja wanted to emulate the strength and determination of Goldberg on the wrestling channel WWF, writing that, “I love seeing WWF because it is full of fast action, reaction, emotion, and brutal force. WWF is also (about) bravery.” He also liked the animated character Ash on the

game adventure series *Pokemon* because of how he protected his wards from harm. He said, "I would choose to be Ash you know. I want to go out and search for wild Pokemon, battle, yeah, I want to be like Ash." Furthermore, Teja said, "We boys you know we want to show off." Ashok looked up to Bruce Willis in his *Die Hard* portrayals: "If I want to take up some of his ideals I will take up his bravery and courage and his wit: how he sorts out small puzzles which leads to greater instances and intelligence."

Not all boys identified with physically active characters, however, as indicated by Christian's appreciation of his several favorite characters' ability to use knowledge and negotiation skills to excell. Zohrab looked up to Richard in the situation comedy *Caroline in the City*, saying that "I would like to be [sarcastic] like him." His desire to be witty was a way for him to be free of some of the conservative traditions of his home and school environments. Ronald of New York admired the character Marshall on an action adventure series *Alias* because "he is always putting things into perspective and he jokes about everything. (He) gives the show 'some logic': they are doing all this stuff during the show and you don't know how they are doing. He is always talking, saying what they should do and what they shouldn't do." Both Ronald and his mother, who watched this show together, saw a bit of Ronald in the character, or perhaps saw a bit of the character in Ronald.

These choices sometimes reflected a deeper need to belong with their peers or be accepted by their fathers. For example, Zohrab in Bangalore used television to connect to a somewhat grounded English-speaking community particularly because he did not fit in with his Kannada-speaking classmates or middle class Hindu neighborhood. He was insecure about being darker than his sister. Comedy, in particular, awarded him intellectual superiority over his peers, where he could be one step ahead with a sarcastic wit, but not too hurtful. In Munich, Mario's parents were divorced and he now lived in a working-class neighborhood with his mother and unemployed stepfather. He endlessly trained for fitness, strapping books to his back while he did push-ups, to measure up to his absent father. He discussed in great detail how he would become a professional truck driver, just like his father. He was always ready for combat: ". . . when someone attacks me then I beat him up . . . when someone gets on my nerves then I get on his nerves, too, and then, well, then I beat him up." In contrast, Dennis in New York admired a character named Ryan on the prime time teen soap *OC* because "he is the kind of person that stands up for people [who] are in trouble and doesn't fight unless it's necessary . . . He always seems to do the right thing instead of going down the wrong path." Dennis could relate to this character because "he has a short temper like I do," but he could "pick and choose when to take a fight or when to walk away. . . . [Ryan] helped me realize that even people with short-anger can pick and choose and just not follow what my instincts tell me to do." Notably, Dennis lived in a community established by a Christian organization that provided social and educational services to families in need. Perhaps his character identifications were influenced by the socially responsible guidance he received from this organization and his family.

The teen girls expressed some of the same essentialist gender sentiments as the teen boys. For KD Ann in New York, boys were a waste of time because "they have no goals." She would be owner of her own company one day: "I would be in control. I would be the boss so they will have to answer to me." Verena from Munich agreed. She said, "Girls have more power" and "it is great to be a girl." Although of divorced parents, Verena did not display some of the anger or anxiety exhibited by Pascal or even Zohrab, whose father had died when he was two. Like many of the girls, Verena idealized her mother and said she enjoyed shopping, wearing make-up, and



was happy with her recent gain in height over the past year. Perhaps her income level gave her freedom and agency unavailable to boys and girls of middle or lower income households. Such a sense of freedom was evident in Anujoth, an upper-income 14-year-old in Bangalore who had endless crushes on actors such as Sujal and cricket players such as Pakistan's Irfan Pathan, who were TV heroes in the well-televised cricket matches. Nonetheless, she also identified with Jassi, the protagonist in a serial titled *Jassi Jaissi Koi Nah*i, because she "has come across a lot of problems in her life and all that and she comes again from a middle class family and she copes up [sic] with everything and she [. . .] is right [. . .] I mean nothing can really get her away from your path. And I think that in today's world there may be a lot of distraction but if you want to you win."

Anujoth's appreciation of this character is similar to that of the middle and lower income girls in Johannesburg, Bangalore and New York who were looking for models of upward mobility. Some came from extremely conservative backgrounds and sought specific role models who could teach them how to assert themselves without inviting the cultural backlash that followed an independent woman in their environments.

For example, Rabia, a Muslim girl in Johannesburg, wanted to be a journalist and said that the shows *Carte Blanche*, *Special Assignment*, and *News* were most frequently watched "for my media work, I must know what is happening in South Africa." Her favorite television show was the local soap *Backstage* for its treatment of such issues as racism, rape, and school pressures. Rabia could identify with Natasha, the show's protagonist, who is an Afrikaner from a rural area, looking for work in Johannesburg. Her beauty landed her a successful modeling career. Another character of the show, Kaybee, drew Rabia's attention for her kindness and compassion for others. Nina of South Africa said she "look[s] up to" several female characters on reality TV shows because of their abilities to inform and inspire, and they all "do what I would love to do." She admired Oprah Winfrey in particular, who "is a funny, kind and emotional person who does a lot of charity work. She has had a rough life and becoming a presenter changed that for her. She has also inspired and improved the lives of many." Similarly, rural Hindu teens Ambika and Shubha from Bangalore watched Kannada (their native language), women-oriented, family dramas such as *Mangalya* (*Marriage*) and *Mahabayi* (*Great Woman*) because they dealt with women's exploitation and strategies for subversion. In particular, Shubha said that "if there are serials about mothers or women's empowerment, no matter what my mother says, no matter how much work I have, as soon as I come home from school, I *have* to watch them." She liked the actress Bhavyashree because although she was not outspoken, she had a quiet dignity and made a respectful career for herself in a very sexist industry. In New York, Tia's favorite TV character was the mother character on the situation comedy *The Parkers*, whom she described as "a middle-age Black woman, overweight but proud of it, funny and down to earth." Tia claimed this character made her laugh and think about how other people were feeling. She was also a role model because "a lot of African Americans didn't finish college but they can realize that it is still possible to go back to school." Tia aspired to be a lawyer. Through critical realism (see Fingerson, 1999), these respondents saw a direct correspondence between the portrayal of women on their favorite shows and their struggles in real life.

Not all teens chose same sex protagonists with whom to identify. Ambika, a girl in Bangalore, was attracted to two film stars who also appeared on TV. Speaking of one of them, she says, "Ravichandra like me does not keep anything in his heart. He is very direct and says everything directly. That's why I like him and his directness." Luke, a boy in Johannesburg, most admired

the female, Colored lead of the South African youth soap, *Theta Msawawa*. Her leadership qualities were attractive to Luke, who said, “I want to be a leader. The program deals with problems that all children go through. And she is independent, I like that.” He added, “I think she would like me – she is also Colored about my age – we have some similarities.”

Also contrary to gendered divides and identifications, one male New York teen identified two female TV characters as his favorites. Luis, a self-identified “New Yorican, because I am from New York and I am Puerto Rican. It’s a made-up word” selected Carrie, the lead character from the mini-series *Sex and the City*, and Sophia Petrillo, one of the four protagonists from the situation comedy *Golden Girls*, as favorite characters. His explanation for liking both characters centered on how they were key as wise commentators and advisors. He appreciated how Carrie provided perspective on different situations, and how Sophia was “always giving a point; like ‘you should really do things in life’ . . . she brings her past and makes it truth in the present.” It is perhaps notable that Luis admitted he struggled with his sexuality, having had both girl and boyfriends. At the same time, he reported that living in and loving New York played a role in his appreciation for Carrie, a New Yorker like him. Likewise, having a close relationship with his own grandmother, who lived with him, might have been related to Luis’ appreciation for the elderly character of Sophia. Clearly, multiple identities besides gender and the challenges these teens experienced in their everyday lives informed their appreciation for specific characters.

Obviously truncated anecdotes relating to gender identity (and class, language, religion, and sexuality) have been narrated here. However, an overall pattern that emerged was that for middle- and lower-income teens particularly in Johannesburg, Bangalore, and New York, television was a peripheral part of daily activities that included going to school, working in the home or in the fields (in the case of rural teens in India), and doing homework. Girls and boys in all cities were allowed very different degrees of freedom. Girls, particularly of middle and lower income families, were socialized at a very young age to perform a variety of service roles for their families and community, roles that were reified on television. Most boys were given greater latitude to explore and nurture their own needs and wants, although some played a significant role as sibling caretakers. Class differences among respondents provided different perceptions of personal agency and played an important role in their program selection.

## TEEN SELVES

This quote from Rabia in Johannesburg generally reflected the sentiment of most of the respondents: “I like being me, I think it’s loads of fun being me.” Rabia’s involvement in media production and training gave her a sense of accomplishment; she was proud of her abilities at school and valued teaching and learning. Like Rabia, Anujoth in Bangalore was involved with her school’s science and literary associations. Just as Rabia’s favorite television character was the rags-to-riches protagonist Natasha, Anujoth loved the somewhat plain-looking yet spunky woman on *Jassi Jasey Koi Nahi*. Anujoth considered herself to be a member of the “hottest gang of girls” in her school, a carefree, well-loved teenager, and said the world practically lay at her feet. Shubba and Teja, also from Bangalore, felt “free” of responsibilities, while Tia in New York said, “I have positive experiences [and] I love myself.” Pascal in Munich felt more grown up and not as “childish like other boys my age.”

Some of the other teens in this analysis felt caught in unstable homes. An overwhelming similarity was related to their sense of responsibility as parent-substitutes within their families, most significantly among the teens in New York. For example, teen girls Shawanna and KDAnn and teen boy Ronald, who had younger siblings, often took over primary care of the younger ones in their homes. Verena, a German teen of divorced parents, believed she had to be a grown-up and take care of herself. Zohrab believed he was practically raising himself, often coming home to an empty house and lonely evenings while his mother worked. His sister lived as a paying guest in the city so she could attend a reputed private school.

These teens also felt pressured by the volatile neighborhoods they lived in and knew that they needed to strive hard to get out. Their sense of pressure and burden was not necessarily associated with being teenagers — these were circumstances within which they were situated. It was the only life they had known. Specifically, Shawanna, and Dennis in New York and Luke in Johannesburg felt immense peer pressure. The latter classified himself as “angry” and faced strong temptation from his friends to do drugs or alcohol. For a few others, their teenage status related to school structures were instrumental in making them feel pressured and burdened. To explain, Zohrab and Ashok in India were in the tenth grade, where state-level examinations loomed before them. The exam is a crucial crossroad where passing or failing is an important indicator of how their futures might pan out. Across contexts, the teens were keenly aware of how embedded they were within their familial and social contexts and knew they had to do all they could to make meaningful lives for themselves or, in the case of the Indian boys, become strong supports for their families.

The same teens who seemed weighed down by their parent-like roles within their families were positive about their own abilities to cope and survive and perhaps to make things better by, for example, helping others, being a leader, and looking at the “upside of things,” as Shawanna of New York put it. As Nina of Johannesburg said, “If I am true to myself I will have no trouble being accepted.”

For some of the girls, strong mother figures helped them articulate their own gendered and teen identities. Shawanna in New York talked about how the mother character on the primetime soap series *Gilmore Girls* was not a “real mom, she’s a friend mom.” Shawanna’s assumption that “real” mothers cannot be friends with their children likely drew on her own experience of being neglected by her mother and taken in by a grandmother, who she described as authoritative and demanding. As a teen, she seemed to admire the friendship between the mother and daughter characters on *Gilmore Girls*. Tia, also from New York, talked about the mother character on the sitcom *The Parkers* having “mother intuition, like putting a child before herself,” thus implying that for Tia, this intuition was a kind of selflessness. Like Shawanna, Tia’s ideas related to her own everyday experience; Tia’s mother, similar to the mother character in *The Parkers*, had her first child when she was a teen and now worked hard as a single parent to provide for her children. She perhaps put her children’s needs ahead of her own, as suggested by Tia, saying she “would do nothing without her” mother. As a teen, Tia was reliant on her own mother but also looked forward to supporting her mother’s return to school to pursue a higher degree, much like the mother character in *The Parkers*.

Some of the teens in Western regions voiced stresses associated with adolescence as a period of confusion, impulsivity, and self-exploration, and their TV choices and preferences reflected this. For example, Verena and Martina of Munich both talked about Lolle in the German teen series *Berlin Berlin*. Verena liked “Lolle quite a bit” and described the character as “fun, chaotic

. . . [s]he cannot decide herself for one man out of the many and she is, she rushed from one situation into the next, well, and she gets into things often just like that. Well in fact she does not really want to be part of the things she gets into." Verena learned from this character that "one should not take it all that seriously, one should also give in, and one should also understand to keep one's life in a proper order." Martina liked Lolle "because she always has those fun ideas, sometimes she makes a fool of herself quite a bit, but it always ends up the right way." While Verena identified with Lolle, Martina perceived herself as quite different from the TV character. Yet both girls appreciated how the character dealt with situations they themselves experienced as teens.

### THEORIZING TEENS AND TELEVISION CHARACTERS

Youth are often theorized as symbols of modernity (Giroux, 2005). In this study, such modernity may indeed be liquid for those in the upper socioeconomic classes, but quite difficult for those in lower income families (see also Bauman, 2000). Television awarded teens a variety of capricious allegiances; they were anchored in local institutions such as family, religion, and school yet were quite mobile in their aspirations; television played an important role in that mobility and agentic belief (see Demerath & Lynch, 2008). We are mindful of the differences in all of the teens' experiences, be they from Johannesburg, Bangalore, Munich, or New York. Identity formation itself is an intricate, complex, and ongoing task. Threads of identity are so intertwined that it is extremely challenging to discuss one identity position without addressing its connections to several others. This is seen in the individual case studies across cultures. We have highlighted gender, class, and teen identities because the strongest patterns emerged across these positions. What we see resonates with a few other qualitative studies that have gone before. The teens in this study showed selective viewing based on gender, with girls generally choosing soaps and dramas and boys choosing comedies and action-oriented cartoons and reality shows, but there are exceptions and overlaps, many of them found in the cases of the New York teens. As did the German boys in Knobloch et al.'s (2005) study, the teen male respondents (with the exception of Luke in Johannesburg and Luis in New York) preferred male protagonists as their favorite characters, wishing they had the wit or muscle of these televised heroes. The girls were generally more flexible, as demonstrated by Beal (1994) and Goldstein (1994), and discussed both male and female characters as their favorites on television. Early socialization of the girls to adult female roles (see Harkness & Super, 1995) could explain why they, across all cities, chose programs that resonated with their notions of idealized motherhood (see Ex et al., 2002) or that provided strategies to subvert patriarchy (see also Mayer, 2003).

The analysis demonstrates that television was used by the teens as an extension of their ongoing journeys toward selfhood. Their social and cultural backgrounds had given them various competencies through which they viewed the world. Keenly aware of their insecurities and the challenges facing them as young adults, they also reached out to television to relieve stress, help them cope, and connect with family members and friends. Television characters taught them how to be funny, strong, and independent, and in some cases, to make wise decisions in their own lives. Their grounded experiences, however, taught them how to appropriate these lessons so as not to step out of the norms of propriety of their immediate social and cultural contexts.

We could learn more about how teens make sense of their various identity positions in their everyday life and as portrayed on TV by inquiring into these areas more explicitly in follow-up interviews with these teens, and by engaging in participant observations in their homes, schools, and neighborhood spaces. In addition, we could conduct critical analyses of the TV programs and people they enjoy and relate these analyses to their talk about why these programs appeal to them. It would be important to look at those programs that include their favorite characters but also to look at other programs they watch regularly, and to inquire further into this viewership as it relates to their everyday experiences, again checking with the teens in more follow up interviews. Furthermore, we could examine relationships among their uses and interpretations of TV and other media, including movies, video games, magazines, music, pleasure books, online environments, and mobile technologies such as cell phones. In particular, we would benefit from focusing on age related and gendered patterns in how such media are used every day, and why, as well as how age and gender is revealed through the content of these media. Certainly issues of socioeconomic status would be significant as well, since access to all media relates to whether and how often teens might be able to use various media, especially the newer media. However, we remain mindful that individual interviews, intermittent participant observations, and text analyses of all media, as rich as they might be, do not give us access to the ongoing contexts of teens' actual lives, and, the environments within which they use and interpret all media from moment to moment, in real spaces and times. Nonetheless, we stand to learn from their accounting for their experiences of these contexts, and all the media they encounter within them, focusing our analysis on how issues of age, gender, race, class, region, and other aspects of culture play out in their negotiations of self, other, and the worlds — and power — of everyday life and media.

How much of what we see on the ground can we actually relate to processes of globalization that seemingly swirl overhead? Conversations with the teens exhibited anxieties of belonging. This study has demonstrated the transnational relevance of most notably American situation comedies such as *Friends*, *Caroline in the City*, and *The Simpsons*; dramas such as *Stargate*; reality shows such as *WWF*; and movies such as the *Die Hard* series. For these teens across the world, regardless of native language or competency in English (especially in the case of dubbed shows), lead media characters rooted in an American cultural context, who conveyed larger than life (or, to be specific, their *teen* lives) individualism, aggression, wit, humor, and competitiveness, represented a firm hand grasp out of the bog of self-consciousness, confusion, and displacement in which they were mired. Although many opted for the socially desirable ideological position that television was mere entertainment and something frivolous to pass the time (Morley, 1980), it was clear that media usage and choice of characters fulfilled a current need to exert autonomy and control over their environments. Teens from rural or impoverished backgrounds found local, national, or private, vernacular language programming to be a powerful source of information and entertainment. For some, as in the case of teens in Johannesburg living in the informal settlements, choice of television was limited to whatever was broadcast on the SABC during the times of day that electricity was available. For rural teens in India, local soaps reaffirmed patriarchal discourse yet carved out possibilities to subvert entrenched hierarchies of class and gender.

A wealth of scholarship in the social science tradition exists on youth and television, many of which are cited in the above analysis. Yet qualitative studies, particularly international, comparative, and longitudinal ones, are scarce. Fieldwork conducted in Johannesburg, Bangalore,

Munich, and New York in the homes and schools of the 24 respondents in this study resulted in a rich variety of materials pointing to the complex world of teens and the lifeline television can sometimes offer them to articulate their shifting and multiple identity positions. More qualitative studies are sorely needed to address important contextual questions and draw out the nuances in audience reception and use of all the media that pervade the local terrain of teens' (and adults') lives, whether teens use all media on a daily basis, or, can only wish they could because they know of their existence, and their value, in the current global media and transnational environment. Scholars and educators in media and cultural studies of popular culture will not be the only benefits of such research. Young people themselves benefit by being given opportunities to be heard about their experience of everyday life, and to reflect on the role media play in their lives, and perhaps consider what kinds of changes might be needed for all youth to understand the problems and promise of growing up in a multimediated, global world.

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